Skin as a medium: video game players' embodied perception and virtual identity construction: Take the VALORANT as an example

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Abstract:

With the advancement of technology and the diversification of players' demands, game skins have become an important part of video games. Based on the current video game practice and the theory of embodied cognition, the article takes the player's body perception as the base and the interaction between human and technology in online games as the starting point of the study, and takes VALORANT as an example to explore the aesthetic symbolic value of the embodied propagation of the skin of the video game, the multisensory immersive experience of the embodied experience, the metaphor of identity symbols, and the construction of the social circle layer. The study finds that the mechanism of user embodied experience communication is correlated with the purchase of skin by game users, and that the communication process fosters the migration of the "reality-body-skin" relationship in the virtual world.

Keywords: video games; embodied practices; bodily perspectives; identity construction; VALORANT

1. Introduction

In Understanding the Medium: on the Extension of Man, McLuhan suggests that "games are extensions, but not of our individual selves, but of our social selves. Games are media of communication.**Error! Reference source not found.** "And video games, as a medium, not only carry specific characteristics and functions, but also construct rich characters in the virtual space. These characters become a platform for players to experience themselves and express themselves in the game world. Players perceive themselves and interact with each other through the bodies and movements of their characters in the game world, integrating their real-life behaviors and thinking patterns into their virtual characters, realizing the seamless integration of reality and virtual reality. This not only reproduces the social interaction patterns of the real world, but also allows players to experience the interactive practices carefully constructed in the game design.

And with the advancement of technology and the diversification of players' needs, game skins, i.e. changes in the appearance of characters or items in games, have become an important part of video games. These skins not only increase the visual effect and personalized experience of the game, but also gradually evolve into a symbol of social identity and identity expression, and establish a special connection between the player and the game character, thus enhancing the player's sense of identity with the game character. In addition, the continuous progress of cutting-edge technologies such as artificial intelligence and virtual reality has greatly expanded people's sensory experience and is profoundly reshaping the interaction between humans and both real and virtual spaces. In this context, more and more scholars have begun to explore diversified communication practices from the unique perspective of "embodiment". Introducing the perspective of technological embodiment in the field of online game research can expand the research horizon from the single psychological level to the broader, more microscopic and perceptible physical level. In view of this, this study will use the game VALORANT as a case study to explore, from the perspective of technoembodiment, how video game skins are presented in the game space and interactions, and how they affect players' experiences and virtual identity construction.

2. Game skin trace and VALORANT game fever

The Legend of Zelda, developed by Nintendo of Japan in 1986, was the first game to implement the ability for players to customize their names and outfits. It wasn't until the rise of games such as League of Legends and Honor of Kings that this decorative system became more systematic and holistic, and "skin" became a generic

term for virtual fashion in the gaming world. Game skins are presented in video games in a variety of ways, they can be the character's clothing, weapons, accessories, etc., or even a specific action or expression of the character[2] . These skins are often creatively designed to meet the player's desire for personalization and uniqueness. By purchasing or unlocking specific game skins, players can show their personality and taste in the game, and even gain recognition and respect in the game community.

In July 2023, the VALORANT developed by Riot Games officially landed on the Chinese servers, and carried out new settings such as character costumes and skin naming with local Chinese characteristics, in order to differentiate the national version from the international servers, and better adapt to the Chinese market and the needs of players. In the pre-season invitational tournament of VALORANT, the sales of the same bundle of skins amounted to $20 million in revenue, which shows the strong ability of the game's skins to absorb money[3] . Combining Chinese and Western cultural characteristics, beautifully crafted game skins and defeat effects are also a major feature of VALORANT. Game skins play an important role in the player community, and their design, optimization, updating and sales activities are just as important as hero character updates, game version upgrades and gameplay changes, and have become an indispensable piece of information in the player community. VALORANT not only mirrors and optimizes players' real bodies, but also extends the relationship between game skins, bodies, and status into the game world.

3. The game skin setting and symbolic value of VALORANT

From ancient times to the present, mankind's pursuit of beauty has never stopped, and the boundaries of aesthetics are constantly being broadened and redefined. The aesthetic experience is an important aspect of game skin design[4] , which affects the player's overall feeling and enjoyment of the game. In VALORANT, the diversity of hero characters reflects this. The game designers have meticulously portrayed agent characters from all over the world, who not only possess unique combat skills, but also have their own distinctive physical characteristics. This diversity provides players with a wide range of choices, allowing them to select characters based on their preferences and sense of identity. When playing the game, players tend to look for characters with proximity or similarity to themselves for self-projection. This projection is based not only on the outward appearance of the character, but also on the character's personality, backstory, and fighting style. By choosing a specific character, players are able to experience a sense of self-identification and belonging in the virtual world, thus enhancing the immersion and attractiveness of the game.

In terms of gun skin design, VALORANT likewise demonstrates a deep understanding of players' aesthetic pursuits. By carefully designing various styles of gun skins, the game designers have shifted players' attention to their own bodies and images to virtual items. These gun skins are not just simple decorations, they represent the player's personality and taste, and become a way for the player to express himself in the game. In this way, VALORANT successfully relocates the object of aesthetics, transferring the traditional pursuit of physical beauty to the virtual world. This transfer not only creates a new virtual aesthetic body, but also provides players with a new aesthetic experience. In this experience, players can not only enjoy visual pleasure, but also feel a deep connection and identification with their characters.

3.1 Enhancing visual appeal

Game skins catch the player's eye through the design of colors, patterns and shapes, providing visual pleasure and attraction. Well-designed skins can make characters look more vivid and interesting. Game skins offer a wide range of styles, from classical to modern, from realistic to abstract, to meet the aesthetic needs and preferences of different players. For example, the Supreme Dragon Flame Set is inspired by ancient dragons, intertwining firearms with the heart-stopping dragon demonic flame, giving people a mysterious and powerful feeling. Purple and gold set: purple and gold set design inspiration comes from the Roman period of the royal knights, the overall style and the ancient ornate aristocratic elements reflect each other. Electric Fantasy Pupu set: Electric Fantasy Pupu design inspiration from the network effects, future elements of science and technology. 2024 June the new on-line dream wings set is captured the heart of the young girl players, the knife is made into a fairy wand style, the overall light and transparent, shaking with a dreamy sound effects.

3.2 Enriching Diverse Experiences

High-quality game skins are usually made with great care and attention to details, such as details, textures, light and shadow effects, and animations, which enhance the visual effect of the skin and improve the player's

experience. Many of the game skins for VALORANT are not just static images, they also contain dynamic effects such as particle effects, light and shadow changes, etc. These dynamic elements add to the vividness and attractiveness of the skins. For example, the fiery Plastic Water Clan Berserker appearance is a blue and silver color combination, the inside of the gun is a dynamic ripple like water flow, the exposed part will glow when you shoot and change the gun to cut it, and the gun has some bandages wrapped around the top of the gun, which is very much in line with the ninja theme. The final appearance of the most prominent place: two characters with clouds, this engraved design in the set of other matching gun will also have a different name, the font will emit light effects. In these ways, the game skin not only enhances the visual appeal of the game, but also enriches the player's aesthetic experience, making the game a more multidimensional and rich art form.

3.3 Emotional resonance

Certain skin designs can evoke emotional resonance in players, such as expressing a certain mood or atmosphere through the use of specific colors or patterns[5] . Players may develop a deep emotional identification with the use of skins after self-aesthetic recognition and increased familiarity, becoming one with their heroes in their bodies and minds during matchmaking. For example, since the launch of the national service, fist company on average every month in the introduction of new Chinese style skin or hero, such as from the national service public beta test main commodity "away from the fire blade", "supine canglong" series of suits, and then "gai Shi hero" to "Qi Tian Da Sheng" to Qi Tian Da Sheng. "to Qi Tian Da Sheng's golden rod as the main design elements, which the knife skin directly replaced by the golden rod, cutting knife action is to play flower stick, this long stick-shaped knife type or the first time in the" VALORANT "appear, even if the price is high, but also triggered a large number of players sought after to buy.

3.4 Embedded artistic value

Game skins can be regarded as a form of art, where designers make each skin have a unique personality and storytelling through their own artistic abilities. This personalized design not only makes the skin more beautiful and exquisite, but also allows players to understand and feel the charm of the game more deeply. In the process of purchasing and using these skins, players are not only consuming a virtual commodity, but also experiencing a different form of art. This form of art is different from traditional painting, sculpture and other forms of art, it has a stronger sense of interactivity and immersion. Players can express their personality and taste by wearing different skins, and at the same time, they can also feel the creativity and artistic talent of the designers. Such as the national style skin - "Crescent Moon Cang Dragon". Regarding the dragon theme skin, "VALORANT" foreign service has been online for a long time. However, in the past, they designed the dragon, more inclined to have wings of the western dragon, around the eastern dragon to be how to design, fist designers went through many rounds of discussion. For example, the oriental dragon how to do in order to show the majesty of the atmosphere, rather than give people a "snake" feeling. For this reason, they will defeat the special effects of the dragon image enlarged several times, until the entire sky, to ensure that players in any corner of the map can see the dragon coiled, showing the characteristics of the Oriental dragon. This is also the biggest special effect skin in VALORANT so far.

4. The multi-sensory immersive experience of the game skin of VALORANT

Embodiment refers to the interaction between people, technology, and the real world, mainly involving technologized bodies and embodied technology, emphasizing the return of the body, revealing how people exist in the world through technology, illuminating the mediating role of technology, and also containing a reflection on technology[6] . The experience of virtual worlds is never detached from the body, and games are similarly embodied. As a special kind of bodily behavior, games not only require the participation of the senses such as vision, hearing, and touch, but also require the player's body to realize actions in the virtual world through embodied devices such as keyboards, mice, and joysticks[7] . The chain of "player's body-device-game character's physical behavior" thus connects the player's cognition and game feedback, and the player can receive information, form cognition, and experience in the process of the game[8] .

In the Internet era, games create social interactions that split time and space. When players are immersed in the process of gaming, they tend to blur the boundaries between the real and the virtual, and integrate themselves with the game characters. This fusion of identities makes players psychologically consider "I" as the "avatar" itself. This shift in perspective not only deepens players' immersion, but also strengthens their sense of presence

in the virtual world. Unlike direct touch and manipulation of physical objects, interaction in video games is mainly realized through visual and tactile feedback. Players manipulate their characters through the visual presentation of a computer screen and the haptic feedback of a mouse, keyboard, or gamepad. This type of interaction, although non-visualized, creates a sense of tacit knowledge, the so-called "feel" of the game. This sensation is developed through practice and experience, and allows the player to control the character's actions with greater precision and ease.

Different gun skins in VALORANT will have different shapes and attack sounds and animations, which will actually affect the player's feel of the same hero's control, and thus form a "good" and "bad" sense of touch when hitting the skin, "light" and "heavy", "fast" and "dull" and other tactile sensations. Therefore, the integrated visual, auditory, and tactile characteristics of the game skin reveal the extension of the body's senses in the above dimensions. Through the overall mobilization of the senses, it expands the player's perception and understanding of the various types of intentions in the skin, and lays the foundation for persona generation[9] . When playing the game, it is not simply a matter of hands and eyes, but of multiple senses and even total involvement. For example, the Phantom "Light Dazzle Sound Spectrum" skin has low recoil, high accuracy, and an excellent rate of fire, which has led to its high popularity in the game, and it is a favorite skin for both old and new players. Berserkers "plastic water clan" cut the gun is a Force pull bolt, there is a special effect around the gun rotation, sound effects on both the sound of water flow, but also has a special Japanese traditional music. Kill effects game space like weightlessness, water droplets floating into the air, the enemy into a water balloon, is able to be poked a special interactive effects, at the same time the whole map of the sky began to thunder and rain, a sense of immersion.

5. Metaphors of identity symbols in the game skin of VALORANT

The construction of online games is based on thousands of symbols that define the player's identity, as presented through roles and hierarchies. In the absence of a real identity, the ideal way to build personality and identity in games relies on game behavior and symbolic representations. As of June 2024, VALORANT has introduced 20 heroes from different countries on all continents, each with physical features and dress in a language that echoes their story setting. Players are able to infer the identity of the heroes through their appearance, clothing, equipment, and skills to differentiate them from other hero characters, i.e., the game designers establish the independence of the identity symbols by personalizing and typifying the heroes' images in the symbol system and giving them differentiated representations.

In addition, in the virtual game world, "level" and "skin" are the most important status symbols, building a virtual environment that follows the rules of the game, and stimulating the participation of players to improve their gaming skills for the sake of the construction of symbols. The use of skins is very common in high-level matches between players and anchors, which encourages players to associate their gaming power with the fashionable image represented by skins, and to subconsciously consider the possession and use of skins as part of a player's power. Players at high levels or with limited edition skins are therefore more likely to gain the respect and admiration of other players[10] .

Taken out of the context of role-playing, skins are also seen as a kind of collectible acquired through consumption, and become the capital for players to show off. Displaying skins on the front page of the game actually demonstrates the economic power of the players. Among the player community, a notion gradually developed that players who owned skins were more powerful gamers than those who used default skins. Skins became a symbol that demonstrated the status of the game. As an immersive and interactive medium, the game facilitated the production of emotional symbols, and players gained self-identification and emotional belonging through participation in game interactions. Therefore, technology and electronic skins are not only a reflection of players' status in virtual space, but also a goal they strive for.

6. The construction of the social circle of the game skin of VALORANT

Games that emphasize sociality, which Ray Oldenburg has called the "third place," where players expand their relationships through visual avatars and auditory intimacy that unfolds in real time; games begin to serve as "relationship icebreakers" and facilitate new interpersonal connections that ultimately lead to "mediated transference. Games begin to carry the function of "relationship ice-breaker" and help to push new interpersonal connections to the final "medium shift"[11] . Online games should satisfy the group presence requirement of "interactive ritual chain", i.e., although the players' bodies cannot be physically present, each player can restore

his/her own presence through identity symbols, language symbols, etc., to create virtual co-presence rituals. For example, players of VALORANT do not need to be in the same real space, but only need five people to be teammates in a game to enjoy the fun of fighting together side by side. Moreover, since the paid skins of heroes in VALORANT have cooler special effects and novel movements compared to the initial skins, which bring visual enjoyment to players, players will not only pay attention to and buy the hero skins they are interested in, but also share the experience of using the new skins and their animation effects on the official hypertext, various video websites and live broadcasting platforms. After entering the game, players can always pay attention to the skins used by other players, and skins with gorgeous painting style and rare quality can often become the center of attention. And different from other video games skin use mode, in the game can be in the teammates or opponents died in battle, pick up their skin use, and in the premise of ensuring that do not die in battle can be used until the end of the entire game round, more increase the player's enthusiasm for the game, as well as to promote the enthusiasm of the purchase of the skin.

John Hejzinha's theory of "gaming communities" suggests that games shape player communities, and that fan communities formed by a game tend to persist long after the online gaming activity has ended[12] . For example, in VALORANT, players share game tips, post game information, make game friends, use a specific game as their identity symbol, and actively participate in related communities. Discussions about the game within the community not only allow players to gain identity and emotional reliance, but also allow the game to serve as a central symbol, spontaneously contributing to the formation of a social circle layer and promoting the game's influence and user stickiness. In addition, VALORANT organizes global tournaments, calling on professional players from various regions around the world to form teams to participate in the tournament. As a result, the fan groups of different regions and teams are the identity belonging communities of game players, who present the fanaticism of themselves and their groups by supporting their favorite teams, organizing groups to watch the matches offline, and voting for their favorite teams online. For example, in the just-concluded VALORANT Shanghai Masters, professional players from all over the world gathered in Shanghai, and the three Chinese teams received different attention and support, especially the EDG co-branded signature version of the skin that sparked a wide range of discussions when it hit the shelves.

7. Concluding remarks

As a virtual commodity, the value of game skins is not fixed, but changes dynamically with player acceptance, market trends, and changes in the internal and external environments of the game. On the one hand, game skins strengthen players' perception of and emotional investment in their game characters through visual and action personalization, while some players may develop an emotional connection to their favorite heroes or game events because the skins are associated with them, allowing players to become more immersed in the game world. On the other hand, game skins also become part of players' social interactions and play the role of social currency in the player community. By sharing and discussing their game skins, players strengthen their ties with other players and form a social group based on common interests and aesthetics; by wearing specific skins, they can showcase their gaming achievements, tastes, or loyalty to the game. In addition, game skins influence players' consumer psychology. In some games, specific game skins may be associated with a character's ability or status, and players may take pride in the rarity or uniqueness of the skins, which inspires a desire to purchase them in the hope that owning them will enhance their gaming experience or gain them recognition in their social circles, prompting players to spend money in order to acquire them.

However, although high-quality game works can serve as an outlet for players to release their emotions and have a positive impact on the social economy and boost consumption, there are also potential problems in the virtual world, such as game addiction and virtual property transactions. If the game industry overemphasizes commercial value and ignores regulation, it may deviate from the right track of development. The unlimited identity construction in online games may make players indulge in the virtual world and find it difficult to return to reality, or fall into the excessive pursuit of virtual goods. Only when players have a healthy mindset and the game industry is standardized and reasonable can the game industry truly promote the positive development of society. The construction of scenes and identity symbols in the design of online games is crucial, and the industry should take responsibility for guiding the game industry in a more healthy, positive and beneficial direction to create more double value for society.

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